

James Allen

A Sermon

By William H. Lyon, D. D.

JAMES ALLEN

First Minister of the Church of Christ in Brookline

1718—1747

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE FIRST PARISH MEETING HOUSE
OCTOBER 27, 1901

(CHURCH GATHERED OCTOBER 26, 1717)

BY WILLIAM H. LYON, D. D.

BROOKLINE, MASS.:
PUBLISHED BY THE PARISH
1900



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

<https://archive.org/details/jamesallenfirstm00lyon>

JAMES ALLEN.

FIRST MINISTER OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN
BROOKLINE, 1718—1747.

BY REV. WILLIAM H. LYON, D. D.

John II: 25. “I am the resurrection, and the life.”

These words have been chosen as a text, not because they have suggested what is to be said today, but because they form the inscription, in the chancel, on the memorial window to the Rev. James Allen, first minister of the church of Christ in Brookline. They are very appropriate words, for he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The latter part of his ministry fell upon stormy times in the New England churches, as we shall see later. He was, like every faithful pastor, very sensitive to the bearing of his parishioners toward him, and it was his lot to fall a victim to acute theological bitterness. He died at the age of fifty-two, largely from the mental strain caused by the general religious situation and the fanaticism and bigotry of some of his people. His wife died six months later, his son the following year, his daughter the year after, and his successor, who was engaged to be married to his daughter, the year after her. In a little over three years, therefore, his whole family, and all possibility of descent from it, were entirely cut off. The remarkably thorough work which death made in this household drew much public notice at the time, and the Boston News-letter,

in closing its announcement of the sad circumstances, said in the quaint fashion of the day: "But though their name is now blotted out from under heaven, we trust it is enrolled above the stars, and that they are, all of them, possessing an inheritance there."

So our first minister stands back there in the hazy distance of a century and a half, with his quaint costume, his courtly manners, his polished style, and his outgrown doctrine,—a human soul to us still, suffering and enduring as we all have to do at times, sharing with the men of all centuries and opinions the experiences of real life. Let him not be to us of today a forgotten or a fictitious person, but one of us, and finding genuine comfort in him who was "the resurrection, and the life."

The ordination of the Rev. James Allen was the culmination of a long struggle of the church for existence. When the town was incorporated, in 1705, the Legislature enjoined upon it to build a meeting-house and settle a minister within three years. The inhabitants, however, were so poor, and many of them were so content to go a long distance to the church in Roxbury, that they twice asked for more time. At last, on the tenth of November, 1714, the frame of the meeting-house was raised, and the building went slowly forward. The expense so exhausted the resources of the town that it was obliged to ask the General Court to excuse it from sending a representative that year, "upon the Acc't," say the records, "of their building a Meeting-House and the great charges thereof incurred for such a Poor Little Town." The house was of the simplest kind, without steeple or tower, and stood just this side of the present parsonage. Three more years passed before the church

was properly constituted, and another year before the first minister was called. Thirteen years, therefore — almost as long as Jacob served for Rachel — did your fathers labor and wait for their religious home.

Except that Mr. Allen was born in Roxbury in 1692, and was, therefore, about twenty-six years old when he began his first and only pastorate, that he probably lived on Walnut street on the site where Mr. Bennett's house now stands, and that he was voted by the town-meeting a salary of £80, to “be raised by an equal and proportionable rate levyed on the inhabitants,” and that he was a preacher of sufficient note to be asked to give the Election Sermon in 1744, and to have that and six others printed,—we know nothing more of him.

The seven discourses were gathered in 1806 by Dr. Pierce's careful hand, and bound in a volume for preservation in our Public Library. Quaint of appearance, of various sizes, brown with age, they were printed in that clear black type in which our fathers, back to the first printers, seem to have excelled most modern workers in the art, until very recently. The first one, a Thanksgiving sermon of November 8, 1722, is inscribed, “Boston, N. E. Printed by B. Green for Samuel Gerrish at his shop, near the Brick Meeting House in Cornhill, 1722.” Bound in with the sermons is a letter copied from Thomas Prince's “Christian History,” from Mr. Allen to the Rev. Mr. Cooper of Boston, concerning the revival of religion in Brookline in 1743. The letter is headed by the historian, with evident pride in his accurate and recondite knowledge of geography: “Brief account of the revival of religion at Brookline, about five miles W. S. W. of Boston.”

The sermons gain a faint flush of reality over their quaint, far-off style by their references to local and national events. We are interested to find one of the sermons to be a funeral discourse at the death of Mr. Samuel Aspinwall, who died "in the 37th year of his age," having been "designed for the ministry but discouraged by an inward weakness," which proved fatal after a long illness. The sermon is dedicated to his brother, Mr. Thomas Aspinwall. In the Fast Day sermon we come face to face with the famous earthquake of 1727, and in the Thanksgiving sermon of 1722 we hear of "the contagious and mortal small-pox [which] was Raging among us, [and] which has carried many Hundreds of our Friends and Neighbors from off the stage of this World into Eternity." The summer past, it was acknowledged, had not been as fruitful as the one before, by reason of drought, "yet God wonderfully preserved the corn, and caused it to grow, almost without moisture, so that with God's blessing there will without doubt be a supply; Bread to the eater, and food for man, and also for the Beast." There is special thanksgiving for deliverance from pirates, which sounds strange to us; for triumph over Eastern enemies, which has a more familiar ring; and for the "Prince of very uncommon Prudence, Lenity, and Goodness," who rules from the British throne—which again seems far off, for the Prince was George I., and the Duke of Marlborough was only four months dead.

But the most interesting clue to local conditions is found in the lamentations over the decay of religion. There is not a religious body today, from the great Catholic church to the pettiest Protestant sect, that

is not bewailing the decline of church attendance as compared with that of the good old days of the fathers. Now, the curious fact is that however far back we may read in the religious history of New England, until perhaps we reach the very generation of its first settlers, we find the same lamentation. It is a chronic complaint. From 1660 down, the black band of mourning runs through every published sermon. Increase Mather said in 1700 that, "if the begun apostasy should proceed as fast the next thirty years as it has done the last, it will come to that in New England that churches must be gathered out of churches."

In the very year in which this church was gathered, Thomas Prince, the author of the "Christian History of New England," said: "There was scarce a prayer made in public by the elder ministers without some heavy lamentations of the decay of the churches; in their sermons, also, they frequently mourned it, and the younger ministers commonly followed their example therein." Yet the parish then founded never had so many members as today. Then the one meeting-house of the town had seats for sixty-six in a population of three hundred and sixty. Today we have a population of twenty thousand, but we must have more than the same proportion of church accommodation, that is to say, many more than three thousand seats.

This habitual mourning over a declining faith we find in the sermons of Mr. Allen also. "Is there not a scandalous neglect of the publick Worship upon the Lord's Day," he cried on the Fast Day, "and has not the jealous God been dreadfully testifying His abhorrence of such practices by the storm and by the

earthquake on the Saturday and Sabbath evening?" And in his election sermon, turning to the "honourable Council and the honourable house of Representatives," the courageous preacher said, "And honourable Sirs, it is to be desired, that you may all approve yourselves what by profession and character you are, the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ; and that you manifest your love and loyalty to him in a solemn regard for the Day, the house and worship of God, and that a proper care be taken to prevent the great and scandalous disorders that some are chargeable with in these respects. I am sensible that there are good and wholesome laws provided, to oblige all persons to attend the publick worship, and to prevent unnecessary travels upon the Sabbath; but how little regard is paid to them. They are every day trampled on, and in the open face of some in authority, and yet there is little or no notice taken of them."

In "local color" we ought perhaps to include the reflection in these sermons of the intellectual culture of the time. They abound in classical references and quotations, few of them trite even now, and most of them showing genuine love of the old literature. For instance, there is a very fresh citation from a Latin author of an ancient Persian custom which might have especial point in these days of anarchism. Every year a period of five days was set apart in which there should be no government whatever,—no crime checked, no contract inforced, in order that the benefit of orderly and authoritative rule might be proved.

We find also the condition of scientific knowledge mirrored here. The days of witchcraft were past, but comets and phases of the moon still had mystic

power, and the ideas of medicine were still ludicrous and often disastrous. We have seen that after the earthquake of 1727 the town promptly observed a fast, and in the course of his sermon Mr. Allen gravely explains the lightning that accompanied it in the following manner: "The lightning is very evidently a mixture of sulphurous and nitrous particles exhaled from the earth by the sun, which meeting in the middle region of the air, are put into a quick motion, or by *antiperistasis* are set on fire; which is also the true notion of the *stella cadens* [or falling star]: the odds between them being only this, the meteor which causes the lightning being shut up in a thick cloud, and taking fire there, and so bursting the cloud, throws itself out with the mighty and irresistible force we sometimes see: Whereas the other being under no confinement is more gradual in its motion, and usually spends its strength in the air. The perpendicular motion of the lightning is from the nitre, the peculiar quality of which is to burn downwards, and 't is this renders it so quick and penetrating."

The preacher only reflected the errors of the men of science in that day; but such passages help us to realize how great is the gulf that divides us from the men of a century and a half, or, indeed, much less, ago, when, for instance, combustion was universally explained by men of science by supposing a substance called *phlogiston* to be mixed with ordinary matter to make it capable of burning. We may smile at the superstitions which saw divine warnings or penalties in eclipses and earthquakes, but we do not smile when we reflect that we have lost the faith of which these notions were distortions, that God

is in His world, working for righteousness and against iniquity, and that although His ways are not always what we think they are, yet He has ways which our greater knowledge ought to help us to find. God was very near and very real to our fathers, but we have woven a network of laws and forces and phenomena between Him and us. Mr. Allen was doubtless wrong when he laid the earthquake to the "little regard had to the execution of the laws of the Province upon bold Offenders," or to slackness in church-going, or even to the "sloth and negligence of the Ministers of Religion in their great work" and to their "hot and fierce debates about Sallaries." But that in less apparent and less noisy ways the ever-present God punishes the decline of public spirit and religious zeal, the thoughtful man does not doubt.

When we come to the doctrines of these old sermons, we shall find all those which were current two centuries ago more or less implied. They seem to us here as obsolete as the good man's explanation of the earthquake, and they have dropped as completely out of our thinking. The question about these sermons which interests us most is, whether, in spite of the apparent difference between our belief and Mr. Allen's, we can find in him any trace of the liberal faith which this parish holds today.

In the first place, the old doctrines seem to have had already a little unreality, a touch of the outgrown in them. The practical sermons have almost no sign of them. The preacher might be a thorough-going rationalist for all the dogma that appears in these. They remind us of those which were preached half a century later, when the Liberal controversy cast its

shadows before, and many a thoughtful preacher avoided all reference to antiquated doctrines and let them quietly drop out of use. It is only when the sermons for special occasions, particularly for Election Day, were prepared, that the doctrines of the fathers were paraded in all their stately splendor. It is almost as if the old family plate were being brought out to give dignity to a great function and to emphasize the fact of respectable descent. But these fine old doctrines apparently are not to be used on ordinary occasions, and when the preacher comes back to his customary pulpit-life he uses plain moral and religious good sense. There is no surer indication of the impending abandonment of a faith than this gradual silence concerning it.

But the convincing evidence of the doctrinal position of the preacher and the doctrinal destiny of his parish is found in the side he took in the "Great Awakening." That tremendous revival burnt over New England and the Middle States during Mr. Allen's last year. It began with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton in 1735, and, after a little reaction, was rekindled by Whitefield five years later. The nervous tension of a century of life in a harsh climate and a gloomy landscape, and of continual watchfulness against and frequent conflicts with savages and subtle enemies, burst out in this religious frenzy. The witchcraft excitement had been an earlier phase of the same morbid derangement, but it was limited in extent and died out sooner. Now, under the calm, relentless preaching of Edwards, as he stood, manuscript in hand, hardly lifting his eyes from it while he set forth the iniquity of man and the wrath of God, or under the fiery directness and tremendous

voice of Whitefield, the smouldering conscientiousness and lingering superstition of the New England character burnt into flame. There was hardly a hamlet in the land where outcries and convulsions did not attest the powerful workings of religious horror and fear.

At first the excitement was looked upon by all good men as the doing of the Divine Spirit. James Allen, along with the rest, lent his hand to what seemed the upbuilding of a marvelous work of God. In his letter to the Rev. Mr. Cooper he writes with apparent delight that "there have been scores of persons under awakening: yea, I have sometimes thought there has not been a single person of my congregation but has been under more or less concern about the important matters of another world, and what he should do to be saved." Among them he mentions a child of eleven, and other young persons. But as the excitement, both mental and physical, waxed more intense, and took on forms which are only too well known to students in morbid religion, the better sense of the country began to take alarm. When ignorant and fanatical evangelists began to roam through the land, accusing revered ministers of irreligion and unfitness for their places, dividing congregations, and planting roots of bitterness in the community, the churches ranged themselves into two parties,—for and against the Awakening. The country districts were, as a rule, for, the larger towns and the cities against. As a rule, again, the old Puritan families and the educated classes joined the opposition. For, though the first reason for revolt was the emotional excesses of the revival, many thoughtful persons waked to the fact that the theology of their

fathers, which they had continued nominally to hold, and might have held still longer under ordinary circumstances, had been quietly outgrown. When Davenport, one of the most famous of the traveling preachers, in a prayer on Copp's Hill, said, "Good Lord, I will not mince the matter any longer with Thee, for Thou knowest that I know that most of the ministers of Boston and of the country are unconverted and are leading their people blindfold to hell," the thoughtful were not merely shocked, but were moved to inquire into the theology that lay behind the whole movement. A cleavage, not merely of temperament but of thought, ran through the New England churches. Then began in reality the drift apart, which at last yawned before all eyes in the Unitarian division. But for the Revolution it would doubtless have developed sooner.

The leader of the opposition was Charles Chauncy, minister of the First Church in Boston. Around him gathered the growing Liberal element in New England. When Whitefield came again, in 1745, he was met by a stern opposition, headed by the faculty of Harvard College and emphasized by the closing of pulpits and the hostile resolutions of associations. The Great Awakening was over, and some heavy reckonings had to be paid. It had done much good. Even Davenport told some measure of truth in the information he imparted to the Lord concerning the ministers of Boston. But it brought to light a hidden divergence of thought which never could be closed or concealed again.

Among those who sided with Chauncy was the Rev. James Allen. Into his parish also came one of the stirrers of strife, and we have a curious evidence

of Mr. Allen's views in a letter which six of his parishioners wrote to him, giving the reasons why they had seceded from his church. The pith of them was that he had opposed the revival and spoken against the traveling preachers. But their value to us now lies in the testimony they give as to the general drift of his sermons. "We think," say the malcontents, "Mr. Allen's preaching had a tendency to settle down upon works: for he, preaching to persons out of Christ [said] that if they used the means, as praying and attending publick worship and ordinances, and refrained from all sin as much as they could, they might humbly hope to be saved." And again, "We cannot join with Mr. Allen in saying that natural persons will fare the better in hell for [doing] their duties." This does not seem to us very serious heresy. Most of us would be very well satisfied if men would do their duties and refrain from sin as much as they could. But in our agreement with Mr. Allen lies the very evidence for which we are seeking, that the first minister of this parish was on the Liberal side of such division of opinion as existed in those days, and that the present theological position of the parish is the result of the direction given from its birth by its minister and by the community that supported him. The parish has never lost the path into which Mr. Allen led it one hundred and fifty and more years ago, and in which it was confirmed by his successors, until fifty years ago its tendency became manifest.

To Mr. Allen himself, however, the strain of those excited days was fatal. The church which the seceders formed under an illiterate and fanatical preacher soon went to pieces, and the pieces were

drawn into other churches in the town. Mr. Allen lived to see the revival discredited. He saw Whitefield left in the cold outside the churches that once welcomed him, and, had he lived two years longer, would have seen the stern but noble Edwards driven into exile and poverty among the Stockbridge Indians. But his sensitive spirit had been worn away by the general experience, and on the eighteenth of February, 1747, the "pious and judicious divine," as he was called, sought rest outside a world that had proved too rough for him. But the stream of broader thought and saner feeling, which he helped to set in motion, and which broke, seventy years after his death, into the Liberal controversy, flowed on over his grave to issues which even now are not all reached. The Broad Church, which is broad enough to include the larger Congregationalists and Episcopalians, and many a choice and quiet spirit in other communions, must reckon him as one of its humbler founders. And in that greater Awakening to which no good man will object, and in which we shall all know even as we are known, he shall be numbered in the goodly fellowship of the prophets and the noble army of martyrs.

